

# Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage  
Unitarian Universalist  
Theology and Spirituality

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## Four Myths of America

Harvard professor Robert Reich in his book *Tales of a New America* discusses four myths which he calls the Rot at the Top, the Mob at the Gate, the Benevolent Community, and the Triumphant Individual. He claims that both liberals and conservatives accept these myths and that their differences are only in interpreting them.

The Rot at the Top is the myth of evil and corruption of top levels in our society. The liberals tend to identify it as in the upper levels of business; the conservatives find it in government. It is the founding and enabling myth of populism. It is repeated in variations in investigative news reporting. It explains the glee with which we pursued Watergate and the Iran/Contra Affair. (These by the way, have left Europeans bewildered: they think we are insanely naive. "Of course politics is like that," they say. But it's not *their* myth, it is ours.) The rituals associated with this myth are performed for us in hearing rooms and courts.

The Mob at the Gates is all foreigners and some minorities. The liberals wish to treat them with tolerance, understanding and coop-

eration. The conservatives wish to teach them some discipline and respect.

The rites associated with the myth of The Mob at the Gates are Aid for Africa concerts, picketing consulates, sending military aid, and cutting off trade.

The Benevolent Community is all of us pitching and helping out. The liberals tend to think we should pitch in and help those in need. The conservatives tend to think those in need should be pitching in too, working on civic improvement jobs, for their welfare payments, and leading moral lives at least.

The rites involved in the Benevolent Community myth include joining churches and other groups that provide a sense of community. Within those groups and beyond, it involves food and clothing drives and civic improvement campaigns.

The Triumphant Individual myth spawns its variations and repetitions in true and fictional Success Stories. The Liberals tend to want full employment so all individuals can feel at least somewhat triumphant. The Conservatives tend to like a few individuals to be very triumphant. To Conservatives, a little unemployment helps discipline workers so their demands don't become onerous and prevent entrepreneurs from triumphing.

The Benevolent Community and the Triumphant Individual are founding and enabling myths for Unitarian

Universalist churches. For example, in his Tenth Anniversary Sermon at Second Unitarian



## Significant Stories

Myths are significant stories. The myths of past cultures are easy to identify: they are stories that don't impress us as much as they seem to have impressed them. We use the word *myth* to mean falsehood, since the stories we call myths are other people's significant stories, not ours. Our significant stories we are more likely to call *facts*.

Because so few versions of ancient myths have been preserved, we are likely to think that myths have only one correct version. We tell our significant stories again and again, with new names in each telling. (For example, "Innocent victim in drug-related shooting.") It isn't a matter of whether the stories correctly or incorrectly report some happening; the question is, "Why is this kind of story felt to be worth telling?"

Significant stories are often told as we reason about, explain, justify, or try to change our activities. Consider political debate: consider how much effort is devoted to "putting a face with the issue," telling stories of the people who would be helped or hurt.

Significant stories often have associa-

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ted holidays, rituals, and activities. Consider the rituals of July 4<sup>th</sup> and the stories of the American revolution and the Declaration of Independence that accompany them.

We truly are a people awash with unrecognized myth.

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### For Reflection

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People can be united in community by stories, particularly stories with an implied *we*. Consider the stories of the founding of the United States -- how we came from England and settled in colonies; how we revolted against oppression, declared independence, and established democracy; how we came from Europe and tamed the western wilderness; how we fought and won wars. Even stories of the Civil War imply we are one people -- we fought each other. By learning the stories (even if they are imprecise history), we learn we are one people.

But consider that some of us do not fit into all of these stories: Our African ancestors did not come willingly, and their stories during the revolution and the founding of the Republic are not stories of democracy. Our native American ancestors were not the *we* in the stories of the taming of the West.

Consider the problems of telling our story as one people: If the stories ignore some of us, then they do not unite us all. If the stories dwell on our oppositions and conflicts -- of *us* against *them* -- the stories are not stories of one people. Even the stories of struggling together against discrimination tell us we are divided.

What stories can you tell that clearly show African and European Americans as one people? What stories can you tell that clearly show native Americans and more recent immigrants as one people?

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### The Individual

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We believe in individuals. This is a relatively recent and localized phenomenon. When anthropologists studied remote tribes, they discovered people behaving very strangely: people did not seem to distance themselves from their relationships and roles. (For example, when asked, "Who are you?" do you name your relatives?) Naturally the anthropologists started trying to explain what was wrong with them. But historians discovered the same thing about our ancestors.

Now we know that people are attached to or detached from their society in varying degrees, and the degree itself is largely culturally determined.

We in our society require that people be detached. Our law assumes that individuals have an inner self that has subjective, individual intentions. Did an individual knowingly and deliberately commit some act? An individual self that thinks, deliberates, and decides is not a universal human concept. But we require it.

Erving Goffman studied this and discovered that the myth of the individual is supported by interaction rituals. In our conversations, we are expected to show respect for each other's inner selves. These selves are sacred objects. We are also expected to build up our own by exaggerations in our stories about what's we've been doing this last week.

Our conversations are casual; we joke; we are ironic; we complain and criticize institutions; we point out that we are expressing personal opinions. All of these emphasize our detachment. Indeed, some men get into insulting exchanges which shows they are detached even from their sacred selves.

Our worship of individuality may be extreme, and if spirituality is an

attempt to achieve balance in life, the myth of the individual is one of the things we may need to compensate

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### The Frontier

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At a party, I once met an Italian who explained Americans as follows:

"When Americans were filling the continent, a couple would move to the frontier, settle on some land, farm, and raise their children. Once every couple of weeks, they would get in their wagon, ride into town, and get supplies. When the children got old enough, they would marry and move to the new frontier and settle on some land of their own.

"They still do it. Now they live in suburbia on a little plot of land and raise their kids. Every few days they get in the station wagon and drive to the shopping center to buy supplies.

"When the kids get old enough and go off to college, they go to a college as far away from home as possible. There they get married and again move on to their own plot of land in their own suburbia to raise their own children.

"Adult Americans look back on college as the happiest days of their lives, not realizing that that was the only time in their lives they were members of a community."

We retell the stories of the frontier, the immigrants, the pioneers. All those repetitions are characteristic of myths.

What do we do under the influence of this myth of the frontier?

We move away from our extended families to follow our careers. We build nuclear families that are easy to move, if we build families at all. We don't take care of where we live - we don't stay, so why should we?

And now - "Space, the final frontier."